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SUBJECT: ETHNIC TENSIONS AND VIOLENCE ROIL BELGIUM

REF: BRUSSELS 1417

¶1. Summary: Simmering ethnic and religious tensions have recently come to the surface of Belgian political and social life through a spate of racially motivated attacks and the occupation of approximately 25 churches by asylum seekers in Antwerp, Brussels, and Namur. While it is not possible to read a casual connection between the issues of violence and illegal immigration, the correlation of these events is surprising for normally peaceful Belgium. These events are symptomatic of the continuing struggle to integrate a diverse population of Belgium's ?native? population and an increasing presence of ?outsiders?.

Deadly Racist Attacks in Flanders:

¶2. On a crowded street in Antwerp on the afternoon of Thursday, May 11, an 18 year-old man shot and killed an au pair from Mali, the Flemish toddler she was caring for, and seriously wounded a Turkish woman sitting on a nearby public bench. The accused was apprehended and is quoted as saying that he wanted to kill foreigners because of perceived slights received at the hands of foreign children while in school. The assailant later identified himself as a skinhead. The assailant's aunt is a member of the Flemish parliament for the right-wing, nationalistic Vlaams Belang (VB) and VB literature was found in his bedroom, though the VB has stated that such violence is abhorrent to its goals and conduct.

¶3. In a separate incident, on Wednesday, May 10 the body of a 23 year-old Moroccan was pulled from the river Schelde near Antwerp. After an altercation with several white youths in a bar on April 30, the man was pursued and either pushed or jumped into the river to escape his pursuers and drowned. His family and religious community protested that his death did not cause an uproar similar to the death of a white Belgian in April, Joe van Holsbeeck (see reftel). There was a 1,500 strong march on Friday, May 12 (in contrast to the 80,000 strong march for van Holsbeeck) starting at the mosque in Kiel which turned violent, resulting in several Molotov cocktails being thrown at a local police station and the destruction of a police van.

¶4. Yet a different racist attack occurred in Bruges in the early morning hours of Sunday, May 7. Two men, a white Belgian and a black Frenchman with roots from Gabon, were attacked and severely beaten by five skinheads. Both victims were hospitalized and the foreigner still lies in a coma. The attack took place

near a known skinhead bar and the police were able to apprehend the suspects at the bar. The police have since released two of the apprehended, while the other three have been remanded in custody. The skinhead bar has temporarily closed its doors, upon the urging of the mayor's office.

15. On the evening of Monday, May 8 a burning cloth was pushed into the mailbox of the house of a Moroccan family in Heule, West Flanders. The family was awoken by smoke and falling debris and all six escaped unharmed. No suspects have been taken into custody.

Longstanding Turmoil over Undocumented Aliens Comes to the Surface

16. In contrast to the recent conflagration of violence directed toward immigrants in Belgium, which is outside the norm for Belgian social life, a longstanding problem of how to deal with the many undocumented aliens currently living illegally in Belgium has risen again to the surface of the Belgian political landscape. This controversy, which has been pushed to the forefront of political debate in Belgium because asylum seekers have begun a well-publicized occupation of approximately 25, has involved bitter words exchanged between some politicians and leaders of the Catholic Church in Belgium. The continued occupation of churches has forced the Verhofstadt administration to attempt the streamlining of the asylum application process. There is broad support for the asylum seekers beyond the narrower debate between the government and the Belgian Catholic hierarchy and, indeed, the Catholic bishops have found a rare point of agreement between them and popular Belgian sentiment.

Comment:

17. Before the recent convulsions of violence in Belgium, one of the hottest political issues was the occupation of churches by those demanding amnesty. The shocking violence in Flanders ? to which the Belgians are plainly not accustomed ? has now surpassed the occupation issue in importance. In any discussion of immigration or racism in Flanders, mention of the right-wing, nationalistic Vlaams Belang (VB) ? the largest political party in Flanders ? cannot be avoided. Even though the party has been kept out of power by an agreement of the other political parties, it is in a sense the most important Belgian political party. The other parties must react to VB's continued incremental gains and massive popular support. Some of the other parties have been quick to blame what they see as the racist rhetoric of the VB as the root cause of the recent attacks, especially the emotionally wrenching episode of the toddler and her babysitter in Antwerp, and hope that the recent violence will signal an ebbing of support for the VB. One of the VB's primary electoral tools, the issue of security, stands to be weakened significantly because of a perception of the relation between the VB and the recent surge in violence. A VB advertising campaign on security, for instance, which pictured a little girl who looks startlingly similar to the toddler shot in Antwerp, has been scrapped in the VB's effort to distance itself from the recent violence which is so uncharacteristic for Belgium. Polls show that a majority of Flemings do not hold the VB morally responsible for the recent violence but that may change if more violence is to follow. END COMMENT

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